

*From the Chicago Tribune*

# Officials: Suspect praised Al Qaeda

## Man in missile sting allegedly backed plot to attack jets

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August 14, 2003

WASHINGTON -- A London man arrested on charges that he tried to sell anti-aircraft missiles to an informant posing as a terrorist praised Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden during negotiations and endorsed a plan to use the missiles to shoot down airliners in the U.S., according to documents released by federal officials Wednesday.

Hemant Lakhani, 68, a British citizen, worked diligently over 20 months to make the sale of up to 50 Russian Igla-S surface to air missiles, according to government prosecutors. In documents filed Wednesday in a New Jersey federal court, they said Lakhani was captured in more than 150 secretly recorded conversations, and traveled to the U.S. and Russia to meet his contacts. He is being held without bond.

Those contacts turned out to be cooperating government witnesses and, in Russia, undercover officers from that nation's Federal Security Service. The sting operation led to the arrests of Lakhani on Tuesday after arriving on a flight to the U.S. from London, as well as two other people who are accused of helping with the transfer of money as part of the missile deal.

"This morning, the terrorists who threatened America lost an ally in their quest to kill our citizens," U.S. Atty. Christopher Christie said during a news conference in Newark, N.J.

While there was no chance that the one missile sold by Russian officials could be used--it was a replica, according to an FBI affidavit filed Wednesday--the alleged plot raised the level of concern that terrorists might soon use such a missile to shoot down a commercial airliner.

"An airliner is virtually defenseless," said Vince Cannistraro, former head of the CIA's office of counterterrorism and now a security consultant, "because you can only provide defenses against one type of missiles, and there are many types out there."

More than 500,000 shoulder-launched, anti-aircraft missiles exist worldwide, according to a recent congressional study. Most are variations of Russian models made in countries, and most remain in military stockpiles. But some missiles, particularly the older and relatively unreliable Russian SA-7 Strela missile, have gone from military stocks to private hands.

Government security officials have said 24 civilian aircraft have been brought down in 35 attempted attacks using shoulder-launched missiles since 1978. Most of the attacks, which killed about 500 people, occurred in Africa, and all but one of them involved slower-moving propeller planes.

The one downed jet, a Congo Airlines 727, was shot down in that country in 1998, killing 40 people.

Though the threat from the shoulder-mounted missiles, also known as Man Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADs), has been long-standing, the Sept. 11 attacks using airliners and several subsequent attempted attacks using shoulder-mounted missiles have raised concerns among U.S. security officials.

One attempt occurred in May 2002, when terrorists unsuccessfully fired two SA-7 missiles at a U.S. military jet as it took off from a base in Saudi Arabia. In November, terrorists fired two SA-7s at an Israeli chartered Boeing 757 airliner as it departed Mombasa, Kenya.

That attack came as suicide bombers set off two blasts at a hotel in Mombasa that was frequented by Israeli tourists, killing 10 Kenyans and three Israelis. Police later found the rocket launchers in brush near Mombasa's airport.

Defense systems urged

After the attacks in Kenya, several members of Congress pressed to require the installation of missile-defense systems on all of America's airliners.

Sens. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Rep. Steve Israel (D-N.Y.) have argued that workable missile-defense systems already are used on U.S. military planes and the jets flown by Israel's El Al Airlines. Installing that technology on airliners would cost an estimated \$7 billion to \$10 billion.

Boxer, in a statement issued Wednesday, called on Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge to support the legislation.

"If we fail to heed this third warning, we will have only ourselves to blame," Boxer said. "We will be culpable for not moving fast enough to protect the American people from this threat."

Ridge's department so far has funded \$60 million in missile-defense research, and it conducted a survey of major U.S. airports to determine whether flights in and out of them are vulnerable to attack.

`Careful study'

The Air Transport Association, an airline industry group, offered a measured response to Tuesday's arrest, noting that, "Before embarking on the deployment of anti-missile defense systems, which are estimated to cost [billions] in taxpayer money, the administration is prudently advocating careful study of the effectiveness of this untested technology and the exploration of alternative solutions."

Cannistraro, among other security experts, noted that the alleged missile sale detailed Wednesday by the Justice Department did not involve real terrorists, only a government informant posing as one. That makes it difficult to count Lakhani's arrest as evidence of a new, domestic missile threat, he said.

"It was a sting all along and there's not much to it," he said. "The Russians enticed the guy. They're not stopping a terrorist plot."

Government prosecutors, though, took a different view. Lakhani, they said, believed that the buyer in the missile deal, a government witness who posed as a representative of a Somali terrorist group, wanted to attack an airplane.

During a Jan. 17, 2002, meeting in New Jersey, the government informant "indicated that he represented a Somali group, wanted to purchase one anti-aircraft missile initially with a purchase of a greater number of missiles to follow," the FBI affidavit says.

At that same meeting, the affidavit states, "Lakhani and the CW [cooperating witness] discussed Usama bin Laden." Lakhani said bin Laden "straightened them all out" and "did a good thing."

On April 25, 2002, while meeting at a hotel in New Jersey, Lakhani offered his advice on which model of shoulder-mounted missile the informant should buy, according to the affidavit.

"When defendant Lakhani asked who would take them, i.e., who the buyer of the missiles was, the [witness] responded that the buyer wanted the missiles for a `Jihad,' [holy war] `a plane,' and `wanted to hit the people over here.'"

200 missiles

In that same conversation, the FBI says, Lakhani asked the buyer, who is not named in court documents, if he wanted to place an order for 200 missiles. The buyer told Lakhani he wanted to start with just one as a sample, the affidavit states.

In October, the government witness made a \$30,000 down payment on the purchase of the missile, which was expected to cost \$85,000, the affidavit states. Federal agents raided a midtown Manhattan office Tuesday and took away file cabinets and two people in handcuffs.

A federal complaint filed Wednesday charged that Yehuda Abraham and Moinuddeen Ahmed Hameed both helped move the \$30,000 for Lakhani.

Last month, the affidavit states, Lakhani and the government witness met in Moscow with two Russian

undercover officers who were posing as missile suppliers. They showed the men a missile that actually was a dummy, the court documents state, and Lakhani said he could meet the Russians' asking price of \$70,000 for the weapon.

The missile later was packed and shipped under a bill of lading that identified it as medical equipment, a copy of which Lakhani faxed to the government witness, the affidavit states.

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